Chefs Salute 'First Foodies'

BRETT ZONGKER,Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Some of Washington's top chefs came together to salute the president ahead of the inauguration, in part because of the first family's influence on the culture around food.

Chicago-based Chef Art Smith opened his Capitol Hill restaurant Art and Soul for a late-night Chefs Ball expected to attract food fans of all stripes Saturday night with its relatively low ticket price of $75. Seven celebrity chefs teamed up for the charity event to prepare delicious bites for a sold-out crowd of more than 500.

From the White House garden to Michelle Obama's focus on healthy eating, Smith said the Obamas, more than any other first family, have embraced fresh American food and care about where food comes from.

"Can that little garden at the White House feed America? No. But you know what it can do? It can inspire America," Smith said. "Most importantly, it's that we as Americans all deserve good food, regardless of economic, social differences."

Smith was Oprah Winfrey's personal chef for years and competed on TV's "Top Chef Masters."

For his first inaugural ball, Smith cooked his trademark fried chicken. There would probably be a riot if he didn't, he said.

Guests included "Modern Family" actor Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Gayle King, co-anchor of "CBS This Morning" and Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn. The wait staff wore white bow ties from Ferguson's organization TieTheKnot.org to promote gay marriage rights in Illinois and across the country.

Chefs served up tiny lamb gyros, crab salad on a cornbread cracker and fried chicken and waffles on a stick, among other bites. The bar offered cocktails called "Stayin Put" and "Stickin Around."

Smith was joined by Washington restaurateurs Erik Bruner-Yang of Toki Underground, Scott Drewno of The Source, Todd Gray of Equinox Restaurant, Rock Harper of TV's "Hell's Kitchen" who helps lead the charity D.C. Central Kitchen and Mike Isabella, a "Top Chef All-Stars" finalist whose restaurants include Graffiato and Bandolero.

Isabella said he was new to Washington four years ago and that the city's food scene has come of age in the Obama era. He plans to open another restaurant later this year.

"I think D.C. is probably one of the biggest and fastest-growing culinary scenes in

America," Isabella said. "It was a steakhouse town 10 years ago. Nowadays it's all about living in the city and being a part of the growth."

In the 1980s, Smith said he visited the Reagan White House when it was party central. The Reagans loved entertaining, he said, but all the cooking was French.

"America had not really discovered or embraced its food to say 'We are America. We are about our food. We are about this wonderful melting pot of people who have all come together and created this amazing culture,'" Smith said.

In the past 20 years, tastes have changed. As first lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton embraced American cooking, and Laura Bush brought Tex-Mex to the White House, Smith said. The Obamas have gone a step further to foster more conversation about fresh ingredients.

Isabella, who joined Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's inaugural American Chefs Corps last year to use food as a tool for diplomacy, credits the Obama administration with changing attitudes around food.

"I think they're the first to really indulge into the whole culinary scene, putting chef programs together for schools and kids, dining in restaurants around the city and really believing in food and farm-to-table," he said. "It's been a huge, huge help for us."

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